DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 255 245 JC 850 084

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TITLE Evaluating A Community College Transfer Program: A Proposal.
PUB DATE [84]
NOTE 9p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Community Colleges; *Evaluation Criteria; Evaluation Methods; *Program Evaluation; *Transfer Programs; Two Year Colleges

ABSTRACT

Recent concern about academic quality and costs has resulted in growing criticism of the transfer function of the community college. This criticism has arisen, in part, from the evaluations of university-based researchers who have argued that a very small percentage of community college students succeed in transferring to four-year institutions and who have concluded from the low success rates that transfer programs are ineffective. This approach ignores the many and varied reasons for student attendance at community colleges and the fact that many community college students have no wish to obtain a degree. If the community colleges are to project effectively the role they perform in transfer and other areas, they should ensure that graduates reach a level of attainment comparable to the first two years at a four-year college, and that their credits are considered academic currency and are granted only for substantial achievement. Two-year colleges should also develop a realistic process for evaluating the transfer function that would exclude from computation those students who do not intend to complete an associate degree program. A division of the total credits taken annually by degree-seeking students by the mean credits needed per student to earn an associate degree produces a theoretical indication of a perfect result in terms of the number of degrees awarded annually. Taking this figure and dividing it by the number of associate degrees actually awarded produces an associate degree success ratio. By dividing associate degree graduates into two groups--those receiving occupational degrees and those receiving transfer degrees--then computing the number of documented transfer students as a percentage of the number receiving a transfer degree, a transfer ratio is developed. This approach would present more favorable and realistic indications of the success of transfer programs, while other studies could assess the benefits received by non-degree-seeking students. (HB)

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EVALUATING A COMMUNITY COLLEGE TRANSFER PROGRAM: A PROPOSAL

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For many years, community colleges have emphasized their role of service to the community--that is, providing a broad array of educational programs and services in response to community needs. Many institutions have changed their names from "junior" to "community" colleges.

Despite this, it has always been difficult for the public to understand that community college programs encompass more than simply the first two years of four-year baccalaureate programs. Community college programs have continued to expand and diversify, and the share of the enterprise devoted to transfer education has gradually declined. However, the prestige of community colleges in the public eye remains linked to these "college" programs.

In recent years with the growing concern about educational quality and the decline in the number of 18- to 22-year-old Americans, the public, legislators, and four-year colleges and universities have questioned the efficacy of transfer programs at community colleges. The issue being raised is whether the open-door policy is successful, or has any chance of being successful, for students who intend to proceed to baccalaureate degree programs. In many cases four-year colleges and universities are saying, "Thank you, community colleges, for filling in when you were needed, but you are not really needed for transfer education any longer."

University-based researchers have examined the community college transfer function, using entirely inappropriate methods, and have concluded that community colleges represent a dead end for most students. Typically, these researchers construct their

findings by using the count of all individuals who enroll at the college and then determining the percentage who receive the associate degree, or who eventually transfer to complete baccalaureate programs. Those of us who work in community colleges know that relating the total number of individuals who enroll, for multitude of reasons, with the number who receive degrees is without value. Unfortunately, these studies are published, consistently, and cause community colleges serious problems. If these researchers would familiarize themselves with the nature of community college programs and populations, they would learn that the majority of students sign up for one course or a short series of courses, with no intention of earning an associate degree. They would also find that many students transfer to complete their baccalaureate degree before fulfilling the full associate degree requirements; and that many who complete associate degrees do so on programs that provide education for direct employment. All of these student objectives are in complete harmony with the mission of the community college.

The methodology applied by university researchers records as an institutional failure anyone who does not receive an associate degree, such as the person who takes two courses in data processing and then becomes employed in that field. It fails to recognize that the mission of the community college is not limited to preparing students for the first two years of a baccalaureate program. To compound the difficulties university researchers often establish the data used to interpret transfer

success two years after initial registration. Why? Because this fits the pattern of full-time program attendance in residential four-year colleges, which becomes the basis for comparison.

To illustrate why this is inappropriate, Miami-Dade Community College's 1984 associate degree graduates attended a mean of eleven semesters. More than half of those students had begun work on their degree before 1979.

We are all familiar with a population of students who are predominantly part-time, who are dropping in and out of college, who are changing majors, and who are developing life directions and educational goals. Yet university-based researchers simply ignore the reality of attendance patterns in community colleges. The results often appear in damaging articles such as that in the September 10, 1984 issue of the "Los Angeles Times." This article indicated only a three percent transfer rate to state colleges and universities.

A further problem is that community colleges enroll the bulk of minority students entering higher education. Data concerning these students are extrapolated and reported similarly, often concluding that community colleges are not a good place for minority students. A recent Ford Foundation report reached this conclusion. In that same report, however, there was a list of programs and services deemed necessary if minority students are to succeed, and these were programs and services typically available only in community colleges.

In short, community colleges have been given a bum rap. The colleges enthusiastically confront the most difficult educational challenges. These challenges are most important to the well-

being of this country. We deal with large numbers of students who have serious economic and personal life problems, as well as significant educational deficiencies, and we try to help those students become productive, full participants in society. It is certainly much easier to serve only the well-prepared and the well-heeled. Better academic results are certainly much easier to achieve with this group, and the rallying cry of "excellence" easily brings public support.

In addition, many community colleges have failed to pay full attention to the transfer function. In too many community colleges, as in urban four-year colleges and universities, the expectations and requirements for students have been scaled back to reflect the skills of entering students and to accommodate changes that have taken place in secondary education in America. The free-flow model that allows students to take any course desired has often produced a classroom environment where faculty cannot maintain high expectations. Further, in some community colleges all courses are counted for credit--whether they are developmental, recreational, or personal development courses--that credit is applied toward graduation. This practice must be discontinued.

We must ensure that our graduates have reached a level of attainment comparable to that of the first two years in four-year colleges. Credits must be considered academic currency, and granted only for substantial achievement. The non-academic courses need to be isolated and accounted for separately from the credit work.

Despite the problems, community colleges have an enviable record of successes, and those successes are far more numerous and frequent than is being reflected in the data published by university-based researchers. Community colleges are now responding to changes in expectations and changes in society, and are beginning to develop programs to strengthen the transfer function. Transfer programs remain a major emphasis of the community colleges, and the reputation of the institution, and thus the foundation of other services, rests on maintaining high quality in this area. Community colleges need to be sure their programs are evaluated on a fair basis, and must begin providing a way to indicate statistically the results.

The following is my proposal for such evaluation:

1. Most community college transfer students attend part-time, and many require an extended period to complete their program. It is perfectly legitimate and an integral part of the community college mission to provide courses for students who do not intend to complete associate degrees or to transfer to universities and, in many colleges, the majority of students are non-degree seekers. The first step in an evaluation procedure would be to determine, by sampling procedures, the percentage of the community college's credit headcount which comprises students who do not intend to complete an associate degree program. The average credit load for those students would then be determined. (Non-credit courses and those which are not "college level," should also be separated out.)
2. The percentage of students determined by the sample to have

objectives other than an associate degree would be assumed to be the college percentage. This figure can then be converted to a headount of non-degree students. The number of these students should be multiplied by the mean credits for such students (from step 1). This number of credits should be subtracted from the college's total annual credits.

3. The remaining credits are those taken by students pursuing degrees, and should be considered the numeric indicator of the volume of effort directed toward producing associate degree graduates.

4. The college should then determine the mean credits taken by students before the granting of the associate degree in its most recent year. This step is necessary since increased academic requirements and program length in some of the occupational areas would result in students having more than 60 credits to complete the degree. (In the case of Miami-Dade Community College, the average was 77 semester credits in the most recent year.)

5. By dividing the total credits taken annually by degree-seeking students (step 3) by the mean credits per student to earn an associate degree (step 4), one produces a theoretical indication of a perfect result in terms of the number of degrees awarded annually.

6. An associate degree success ratio would be developed by dividing the theoretically perfect associate degree production (step 5) by the number of associate degrees

actually granted. (At Miami-Dade Community College, this success figure would be approximately 75 percent.)

7. The associate degree graduates should then be separated into those receiving occupational degrees and those receiving transfer degrees.

8. A transfer ratio would be the number of documented transfer students as a percentage of the number receiving a transfer degree.

The formula approach above would produce results that:

a) re-establish the fact that our mission is far greater in scope than providing only transfer programs;

b) present much more realistic and favorable indications of the success of our transfer education programs; and

c) provide the opportunity to develop data concerning other students to determine the benefits they receive at the institution.

The suggested approach is far from perfect, as it would still be difficult to account for students who transfer before completing an associate degree program, and the benefit to transfer students who take coursework but do not complete the programs would not be documented. However, I believe this approach to be far superior to the current arrangements, operationally feasible, and worthy of review by community college leaders.

MAY 10 1985
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